

The Light in the Clearing

A TALE of the NORTH COUNTRY in the TIME of SILAS WRIGHT

By IRVING BACHELLER

Author of EBEN HOLDEN, D'RI AND I, DARREL OF THE BLESSED ISLES, KEEPING UP WITH LIZZIE, Etc., Etc.

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BARTON MAKES HIS FIRST FORAY INTO THE WORLD AS A STUDENT IN MICHAEL HACKETT'S ACADEMY

Synopsis.—Barton Baynes, an orphan, goes to live with his uncle, Peabody Baynes, and his Aunt Deel on a farm on Rattleroad, in a neighborhood called Lickitysplit, about the year 1826. He meets Sally Dunkelberg, about his own age, but socially of a class above the Bayneses, and is fascinated by her pretty face and fine clothes. Barton also meets Rovin' Kate, known in the neighborhood as the "Silent Woman." Amos Grimshaw, a young son of the richest man in the township, is a visitor at the Baynes home and Rovin' Kate tells the boys' fortunes, predicting a bright future for Barton and death on the gallows for Amos. Barton meets Silas Wright, Jr., a man prominent in public affairs, who evinces much interest in the boy. Barton learns of the power of money when Mr. Grimshaw threatens to take the Baynes farm unless a note which he holds is paid. Now in his sixteenth year, Barton, on his way to the post office at Canton, meets a stranger and they ride together. They encounter a highwayman, who shoots and kills the stranger. Barton's horse throws him and runs away. As the murderer bends over the stranger Barton throws a stone, which he observes wounds the thief, who makes off at once.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

The beauty of that perfect day was upon her. I remember that her dress was like the color of its fireweed blossoms and that the blue of its sky was in her eyes and the yellow of the sunlight in her hair and the red of its clover in her cheeks. I remember how the August breezes played with her hair, flinging its golden curving strands about her neck and shoulders so that it touched my face, now and then, as we walked! Somehow the rustle of her dress started a strange vibration in my spirit. I put my arm around her waist and she put her arm around mine as we ran along. A curious feeling came over me. I stopped and loosed my arm.

"It's very warm!" I said as I picked a stalk of fireweed.

What was there about the girl which so thrilled me with happiness?

She turned away and felt the ribbon by which her hair was gathered at the back of her head.

After a moment of silence I ventured:

"I guess you've never fallen in love."

"Yes, I have."

"Who with?"

"I don't think I dare tell you," she answered, slowly, looking down as she walked.

"I'll tell you who I love if you wish," I said.

"Who?"

"You." I whispered the word and was afraid she would laugh at me, but she didn't.

We stopped and listened to the song of a bird—I do not remember what bird it was—and then she whispered:

"Will you love me always and forever?"

"Yes," I answered in the careless way of youth.

She stopped and looked into my eyes and I looked into hers.

"May I kiss you?" I asked, and afraid, with cheeks burning.

She turned away and answered: "I guess you can if you want to."

Now I seem to be in Aladdin's tower and to see her standing so red and graceful and innocent in the sunlight, and that strange fire kindled by our kisses warms my blood again.

That night I heard a whispered conference below after I had gone upstairs. I knew that something was coming and wondered what it might be.

I remember the sad excitement of that ride to the village and all the words of advice and counsel spoken by my aunt.

I remember looking in vain for Sally as we passed the Dunkelbergs'. I remember my growing loneliness as the day wore on and how Aunt Deel stood silently buttoning my coat, with tears rolling down her cheeks while I leaned back upon the gate in front of the Hackett house, on Ashery lane, crying to act like a man and rather ashamed of my poor success. Uncle Peabody stood surveying the sky in silence with his back toward us. He turned and nervously blew out his breath. His lips trembled a little as he said:

"I dunno but what it's goin' to rain."

I watched them as they walked to the tavern sheds, both looking down at the ground and going rather unsteadily. Oh, the look of that beloved pair as they walked away from me!—the look of their leaning heads! Their silence and the sound of their footsteps are, somehow, a part of the picture which has hung all these years in my memory.

Sally Dunkelberg and her mother came along and said that they were glad I had come to school. I could not talk to them, and seeing my trouble they went on, Sally waving her hand to me as they turned the corner below. I felt ashamed of myself. Suddenly I heard the door open behind me and the voice of Mr. Hackett:

"Bart," he called, "I've a friend here who has something to say to you. Come in."

I turned and went into the house.

"Away with sadness—liddle buck!" he exclaimed as he took his violin from its case while I sat wiping my eyes.

"Away with sadness! She often raps at my door, and while I try not to be



"Will You Love Me Always and Forever?"

be. Soon Uncle Peabody came up to our little room looking highly serious. I sat, half undressed and rather fearful, looking into his face. As I think of the immaculate soul of the boy, I feel a touch of pathos in that scene. I think that he felt it, for I remember that his whisper trembled a little as he began to tell me why men are strong and women are beautiful and given in marriage.

"You'll be falling in love one of these days," he said. "It's natural ye

should. You remember Rovin' Kate?" he asked by and by.

"Yes," I answered.

"Some day when you're a little older I'll tell ye her story an' you'll see what happens when men an' women break the law o' God. Here's Mr. Wright's letter. Aunt Deel asked me to give it to you to keep. You're old enough now an' you'll be goin' away to school before long, I guess."

I took the letter and read again the superscription on its envelope:

"To Master Barton Baynes:

(To be opened when he leaves home to go to school.)"

I put it away in the pine box with leather hinges on its cover which Uncle Peabody had made for me and wondered again what it was all about, and again that night I broke camp and moved further into the world over the silent trails of knowledge.

Uncle Peabody went away for a few days after the harvesting. He had gone afoot, I knew not where. He returned one afternoon in a buggy with the great Michael Hackett of the Canton academy. Hackett was a big, brawny, red-haired, kindly Irishman with a merry heart and tongue, the latter having a touch of the brogue of the green isle which he had never seen, for he had been born in Massachusetts and had got his education in Harvard. He was then a man of forty.

"You're coming to me this fall," he said as he put his hand on my arm and gave me a little shake. "Lad! you've got a pair of shoulders! Ye shall live in my house an' help with the chores if ye wish to."

"That'll be grand," said Uncle Peabody, but, as to myself, just then, I knew not what to think of it.

[END OF BOOK ONE.]

BOOK TWO

Which Is the Story of the Principal Witness.

CHAPTER VIII.

In Which I Meet Other Great Men.

It was a sunny day late in September on which Aunt Deel and Uncle Peabody took me and my little pine chest with all my treasures in it to the village where I was to go to school and live with the family of Mr. Michael Hackett, the schoolmaster.

I remember the sad excitement of that ride to the village and all the words of advice and counsel spoken by my aunt.

I remember looking in vain for Sally as we passed the Dunkelbergs'. I remember my growing loneliness as the day wore on and how Aunt Deel stood silently buttoning my coat, with tears rolling down her cheeks while I leaned back upon the gate in front of the Hackett house, on Ashery lane, crying to act like a man and rather ashamed of my poor success. Uncle Peabody stood surveying the sky in silence with his back toward us. He turned and nervously blew out his breath. His lips trembled a little as he said:

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The last words were spoken in a whisper, with one hand on my breast.

He turned the strings and played the "Fisher's Hornpipe." What a romp of merry music filled the house! I had never heard the like and was soon smiling at him as he played. His bow and fingers flew in the wild frolic of the "Devil's Dream." It led me out of my sadness into a world all new to me.

"Now, God bless your soul, boy!" he exclaimed, by and by, as he put down his instrument. "We shall have a good time together—that we will. Not a stroke o' work this day! Come, I have a guide here that will take us down to the land o' the fairies."

Then with his microscope he showed me into the wonder world of littleness of which I had no knowledge.

"The microscope is like the art o' the teacher," he said. "I've known a good teacher to take a brain no bigger than a fly's foot an' make it visible to the naked eye."

One of the children, of which there were four in the Hackett home, called us to supper. Mrs. Hackett, a stout woman with a red and kindly face, sat at one end of the table, and between them were the children—Mary, a pretty daughter of seventeen years; Maggie, a six-year-old; Ruth, a delicate girl of seven, and John, a noisy, red-faced boy of five. The chairs were of plain wood—like the kitchen chairs of today. In the middle of the table was an empty one—painted green. Before he sat down Mr. Hackett put his hand on the back of this chair and said:

"A merry heart to you, Michael Henry."

I wondered at the meaning of this, but dared not to ask. The oldest daughter acted as a kind of moderator with the others.

"Mary is the constable of this house, with power to arrest and hale into court for undue haste or rebellion or impoliteness," Mr. Hackett explained.

"I believe that Sally Dunkelberg is your friend," he said to me presently.

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"A fine slip of a girl that and a born scholar. I saw you look at her as the Persian looks at the rising sun."

I blushed and Mary and her mother and the boy John looked at me and laughed.

"Puer pulcherrime!" Mr. Hackett exclaimed with a kindly smile.

Uncle Peabody would have called it a "stout snag." The schoolmaster had hauled it out of his brain very dextrously and chucked it down before me in a kind of challenge.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You shall know in a week, my son," he answered. "I shall put you into the Latin class Wednesday morning, and God help you to like it as well as you like Sally."

Again they laughed and again I blushed.

"Hold up yer head, my brave lad," he went on. "Ye've a perfect right to like Sally if ye've a heart to."

"A lad in his teens will never know beans if he hasn't an eye for the girls."

It was a merry supper, and when it ended Mr. Hackett rose and took the green chair from the table, exclaiming:

"Michael Henry, God bless you!"

deposited. There were in the room a bed, a chair, a portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte and a small table on which were a dictionary, a Bible and a number of schoolbooks.

"These were Mary's books," said Mr. Hackett. "I told your uncle that ye could use them an' welcome."

I sat down and opened the sealed envelope with trembling hands and found in it this brief note:

"Dear Partner: I want you to ask the wisest man you know to explain these words to you. I suggest that you commit them to memory and think often of their meaning. They are from Job:

"His bones are full of the sins of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the dust."

"I believe that they are the most impressive in all the literature I have read."

"Yours truly,

"SILAS WRIGHT, JR."

I read the words over and over again, but knew not their meaning. Sadly and slowly I got ready for bed. The noises of the village challenged my ear after I had put out my candle. There were many barking dogs. Some horsemen passed, with a creaking of saddle leather, followed by a wagon. Soon I heard running feet and eager voices. I rose and looked out of the open window. Men were hurrying down the street with lanterns.

"He's the son o' Ben Grimshaw," I heard one of them saying. "They caught him back in the south woods

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Then he kissed his wife and said:

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Mary helped her mother with the dishes, while I sat with a book by the fireside. Soon Mrs. Hackett and the children came and sat down with me. "Let's play backgammon," Mary proposed.

"I don't want to," said John.

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"Who is Michael Henry?" I asked.

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